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ABSTRACT

This paper describes formative evaluation procedures of a collaborative program developed by the University of Georgia's Rural Revitalization Initiative. The initiative represents a collaboration of units at the university and among local people from several different areas and disciplines. Twelve Georgia counties participated in the project, which focused on governmental management, community development, rural heritage, economic development, and training simulations. The project's goals are: (1) increasing the level of development planning expertise; (2) fostering new approaches to rural economic development; (3) creating pilot projects in education, adult literacy, and health; and (4) developing training simulations for teaching long-term strategic planning to rural community leadership. Each of these goals was managed by a different project "service unit." Evaluation procedures were planned through personal interviews with the initiative's primary stakeholders. These interviews generated extensive information for ongoing evaluation procedures and revealed varied expectations for the project. Informal observations and conversations at initiative meetings suggest more evidence of communication and cooperation than actual collaboration. The paper concludes with the observation that early evaluation of the Rural Revitalization Initiative used primarily qualitative methods, including interviews, reports, and surveys, to describe what happened in the project. A standardized coding form and coding rules also were developed to handle program documents and data. (TES)

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COLLABORATING ON EVALUATION OF THE RURAL REVITALIZATION INITIATIVE

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Collaborative efforts in evaluation are being developed at the University of Georgia through the Rural Revitalization Initiative made possible by a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The University of Georgia Rural Revitalization Initiative represents both a collaboration of service units at the University of Georgia and the collaboration of local people--public and private--across disciplines, professions, neighborhoods, and county lines. While each of the program areas addresses a major goal, each program has mutually supported activities to address all of the goals. Our belief is that by practicing collaboration, we thus teach collaboration.

We have targeted 12 counties in the state to participate in the project. The counties represent both the best and the worst of rural Georgia: prime farmland with diminishing book value; an aging population tied to traditional economic systems; higher than average rates of illiteracy; infant mortality and morbidity and teen pregnancy; small communities finding it increasingly hard to provide basic services at an appropriate scale and technology for rural Americans; and a tendency not to move on which can only be explained by the local resident's love of place.

The Rural Revitalization Initiative is focusing efforts in the areas of governmental management, community development, rural heritage, economic development and training simulations.

The Initiative has five goals and various service units are charged with implementing the goals collaboratively.

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GOAL 1: To increase the level of expertise and long-range planning capability of local rural governments in the areas of finances, management and planned growth. This goal will be addressed through training conducted by the Carl Vinson Institute of Government and the Georgia Center for Continuing Education.

GOAL 2: To develop a minimum of four pilots in collaborative approaches to the delivery of human services, primarily in education, adult literacy and health. This goal will be addressed by the Institute of Community and Area Development.

GOAL 3: To increase and improve "rural literacy" through a series of educational programs for the general public which focus upon the rural heritage, innovation and rural communities. This goal will be addressed by the Cooperative Extension Service and the College of Journalism.

GOAL 4: To foster new approaches to economic development in rural communities which rely on developing internal capacity for small business development and business retention through education, counseling and demonstration incubators for new economic enterprises. This goal will be addressed by the Small Business Development Center.

GOAL 5: To develop a series of training simulations for use in teaching long-term strategic planning to rural community leadership. This goal will be addressed by the Georgia Center for Continuing Education.

The project involves not only major service units at the University of Georgia, but a number of statewide agencies and organizations to insure that we keep all service units and cooperating agencies and organizations informed about the project, a grant

Management Council has been set up. The Council meets on a quarterly basis and involves representatives from the service units at the University and representatives from cooperating agencies and organizations. These meetings give those working on the project an opportunity to share ideas and resources.

Each of the service units working on the project are charged with the development and evaluation of their portion of the project and additional evaluation is being conducted using Michael Quinn Patton's model to determine the success of the collaborative efforts between service units.

At this time Margaret Holt will address how the collaborative evaluation was developed and is being implemented.

Administrators of the Rural Revitalization Initiative are to be congratulated for insisting that a thinking and planning for evaluation of the project be initiated at the onset of the project. In addition, to the obvious need for individual service units to provide for an evaluation of their projects and activities, the proposal contained the charge that collaboration among the providers be assessed. Specifically, it was stated: "Therefore in addition to evaluating each goal we propose an additional measure be constructed to test the impact of collaboration among service units on this project upon joining efforts in other areas of service programming." The operational definition of collaboration guiding internal evaluation was submitted by the director of the University of Georgia's Leadership Institute: Two or more organizations working together in a sustained way toward common goals. Each shares in the planning, each contributes some resources, each receives the benefits and the losses.

The evaluation to date has involved many components. At the onset we determined that Patton's (1980) procedures for a qualitative evaluation would provide an appropriate starting point. His recommendations for evaluations stress the importance of involving primary stakeholders for the evaluation and special consideration of actual utilization of evaluation reports and findings. Therefore, 14 major stakeholders were identified and three questions were developed for person-to-person interviews. These questions were:

1. In your opinion, who are the intended evaluation users and stakeholders (particular people, not organizations) who you expect would actually use evaluation findings? Certainly you are a stakeholder. Who are others?
2. What questions or issues do you advise us to address in this evaluation?
3. How would you actually use the data if collected, if we are able to secure the findings?

Each interview lasted approximately one hour. Both the head of each service unit involved along with the individual having major responsibility for directing the activities for the unit participated in interviews. In addition, the Vice-President for Research, University President, Project Director, and a Representative of the Kellogg Foundation (funder of the project) were interviewed as primary stakeholders.

These interviews generated extensive and rich information and demonstrated to the evaluators that the expectations for success of the project and projected uses for findings were varied. Stakeholders identified ranged from citizens of the counties targeted for projects to the Governor of Georgia. Over 50 positions were identified (in

some cases specific individuals; in other instances agencies or positions). Issues considered important to address in the evaluation were extensive with standard expectations such as "Did we meet the original objectives?" to more creative inquiries like "Is there any celebration of rural life in this project?" Finally, proposed uses of the evaluation finding were also instructive. A sampling of responses to this question would include: "I would use the data in consideration of reorganizing my unit and staff locations across the state: to advise the Vice-President on management of the service units; for speeches, teaching, and workshops; to request funding for particular projects based on the success of the Rural Revitalization Initiative."

The findings from the original interviews have proved useful in planning for ongoing efforts to evaluate collaboration. Other components have included a document analysis (to be discussed later in this paper), observations through participation in all monthly and quarterly meetings, and a follow-up study of a Cooperative Extension Service Bed and Breakfast Conference and follow-up with participants in focus groups consisting of community journalists and community leaders.

The Bed and Breakfast Conference Follow-up Survey and follow-up of community journalists and leaders in all 12 counties who participated in focus groups conducted by faculty in the University of Georgia's College of Journalism have modified impact assessments developed earlier by Courtenay and Holt (1986). Impact studies are program assessments conducted after some predetermined time lapse following the implementation of programs. The Bed and Breakfast Survey consists of 14 items which ask respondents for such information as whether or not any of the ideas or insights

gained at the conference had a direct impact on them, if they took notes or received handouts and have used them since the conference, if they have followed up in any ways on information presented, if they have talked with others after the conference about the information, and if they have attended any similar programs. Other questions pertain to the delivery of the conference program specifically and whether or not conferees felt the program achieved the stated objectives.

The focus group follow-up is a collaborative effort between the Department of Adult Education and College of Journalism. A literature review suggests no evidence of pursuing focus group participants after these experiences to determine if such sessions have any ongoing impact. Several questions are similar to those proposed above for the Bed and Breakfast Conference Follow-up. In addition, this survey contains a few items to see if participants are aware of collaboration between service units in their own local communities.

Informal observations and conversations at monthly and quarterly meetings suggest to this evaluator that in the earlier months of the project, there is greater evidence of communication and cooperation than collaboration (if using the definition of collaboration cited above). Communication here means that representatives of the participating service units provide reports of their activities to one another to keep all involved equally informed. Cooperation implies that providers give assistance to one another by identifying resources for entering into and working in the communities, although the efforts are not joint efforts. In some instances this has meant informing people about to enter a community about its "culture" and "politics" to expedite a

positive response for project activities. It may not be reasonable to expect a multidimensional project of this magnitude involving several service units working in different combinations in 12 counties to work together beyond valuable communication and cooperation in start up and planning activities. Further, although the missions of each unit are viewed to be "service" utilizing University resources, the missions are appropriately unique and distinct. However, as the project has moved into its final months, conversations at monthly meetings particularly contain indications of new collaborative efforts and more specific evidence of working together on county initiatives.

In summary, the evaluation of the Rural Revitalization Initiative has primarily used qualitative methods to describe what has happened in the project. These methods have included 14 interviews with stakeholders, a document analysis, two focus-group surveys, independently-conducted surveys with community representatives and service unit representatives, and observation through participation at monthly and quarterly planning and reporting meetings. Supporting data (demographic and profiles) have also been prepared describing each of the 12 counties, providing, for example, population, education, economic and quality of life indicators.

A document analysis was conducted in order to utilize a rich resource of readily available data. The documents contained perspectives that were relevant to the purpose of the evaluation and it was assumed that these would also provide insight into the collaborative process that would not be found in the other methods of evaluation used.

The project director encouraged the service unit staff to forward all written documents related to the initiative to his office. These documents included: letters, memos, notes, agendas, minutes, news releases and news clippings. All these materials rather than restricted documents were used since they potentially could treat the categories in the definition of collaboration. These documents involved direct correspondence to the project director; correspondence between units; between units and support agencies; between units and community leaders; and correspondence with other institutions not associated with the University. The units during this time were organizing and developing their plan of action and making contact in the selected counties.

The method of handling the documents was consistent throughout the process. A standardized coding form and coding rules were developed. The characteristics for the documents were recorded on the forms and included in the following: who wrote the document, who received the document, what form of document was used, which county was involved and the date the document was written. Each coding form also included a category under which sentences relaying the theme of collaboration were chosen as the unit of analysis. It was decided that the most precise description of the categories could be determined from sentences rather than words or paragraphs. If the same category of collaboration appeared more than once in a document, these were counted as separate responses. If more than one category appeared in a document, these were also counted as individual responses.

Categories were developed from the definition of collaboration. The categories were exclusive and independent, which means that unit of analysis can be placed in one and only one category. The categories were delineated, new ones were added, and others were dropped. Those finally chosen were kept because of their usefulness and relation to the purpose of the analysis. Originally the categories were: planning, resource contribution, receives the benefits, receives the losses, direct statements of collaboration, gracious exchanges "end," (I hope to hear from you soon, Give me a call if you need assistance) and gracious exchanges "within" (Thank you for sending the information, Thanks for being so prompt in calling back). Gracious exchanges "end" and "within" were dropped since they were common to all documents and thus considered to be data saturation. The category, receives the losses, was dropped from the final listing since there were no entries made in this category. Those categories added were: request for collaboration, recognition of collaboration, and outcomes due to collaboration. These were added because of their frequent inclusion in many documents. Thus, the coding was dependent on the absence or presence of a category.

Reliability of the analysis was ensured by following certain practices. Thus, those interested could apply the same categories to the same documents and achieve similar results. Categories were established so they were related to the definition of collaboration, independent and exclusive. The coding rules were specific, thus multiple interpretations of the data were limited. Others were consulted to assist in the coding process, and a consistency with time was sought. The data was coded twice to determine

if the same results were obtained when the same set of categories were applied to these documents. The same results were found in both analyses.

A document analysis for the second year of the initiative was not continued. The documents that were received during the months of July and August were showing information not previously appearing in the June 1988 to June 1989 documents. However, the current correspondence forwarded and received by the director was limited in quantity and was no longer presenting information that was different from the first year.

Courtenay, B. C., & Holt, M. E. (1986). Evaluation in the humanities: More than participant satisfaction. An impact evaluation of two symposia. Funded by the Georgia Endowment for the Humanities.

Patton, M. (1980). Utilization-focused evaluation. Beverly Hills: Sage